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**Theorising commercial society: Rousseau, Smith and Hont**

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In his posthumously published lectures, *Politics in Commercial Society*, István Hont argues that Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith should be understood as theorists of commercial society. This article challenges Hont's interpretation of both thinkers and shows that some of his key claims depend on conflating the terms 'commercial society' and 'commercial sociability'. I argue that, for Smith, commercial society should not be defined in terms of the moral psychology of commercial sociability, before questioning Hont's Epicurean interpretation of Smith's theory of sociability. I then turn to Rousseau and outline some of the difficulties involved with classifying him as a theorist of commercial society, the most important of which is that he often appeared to be more deeply opposed to commercial progress than Hont suggests. I conclude by highlighting some of the most salient differences between Rousseau's and Smith's views of the politics of eighteenth-century Europe.

István Hont (2005: 156) thought that intellectual history, at its best, could lead us to ask more penetrating questions about the present. Understanding the questions past thinkers asked, and the answers they pursued, might 'help us avoid repeating the same questions again and again, running in circles unproductively.' If, for example, we think there is a contemporary crisis of the nation-state, we would do well to reflect on its intellectual origins and consider how this label came to be applied to the states we inhabit today. Viewed this way, those who posit a contemporary crisis fail to see that the tensions and problems they identify have been inherent in the idea of the nation-state from its inception. The nation-state, on Hont's (2005: especially 447-456) analysis, has always been in crisis. More generally, turning to the early-modern period may allow us to understand our own predicament better, for the 'commercial future that many eighteenth-century observers imagined as plausible has become our historical present.' (Hont, 2005: 156)

In *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, the posthumously published version of his 2009 Carlyle Lectures, Hont adopts a similar approach. Too often commercial society is 'used incorrectly and in a theoretically imprecise sense … as a theoretical

category, *commercial society* is hardly used correctly at all.' (4)[1] Scholars often use the term to distance their analysis from the Marxist language of capitalism or bourgeois society, but this 'remains an unfinished journey'. One aim of the book is thus 'to throw some light on its possible use in political thought.' (6) Hont's guides in doing so are Rousseau and Smith and, in a work that aims to surprise, one of its most 'seemingly radical' or 'paradoxical' arguments is that Rousseau, and not just Smith, should be read as a theorist of commercial society (2). Rousseau, of course, is often read as a critic of commercial society, but Hont uses the term 'theorist' in a narrower sense to argue that Rousseau's own political and economic proposals were intended for commercial societies.

If the approach Hont takes is familiar from his earlier work, the experience of reading *Politics in Commercial Society* is somewhat different (a point nicely captured by Harris, 2016: 151-152). It is a bold and insightful work, but those insights are not always fully developed and worked out in the text itself. We encounter nothing like the extensive footnotes that support many of Hont's arguments elsewhere and are left wondering how these arguments would have looked had they been subjected to level of scholarly dissection characteristic of his other work. Hont aims to illuminate some of the most interesting points of comparison between Rousseau and Smith with a view to reorienting the way we understand both thinkers and the relation between them. The book comprises six chapters paired around the themes of 'Commercial Sociability', 'Histories of Government' and 'Political Economy'. While these chapters focus on Rousseau and Smith, Hont's coverage is wide-ranging and the book's most original contribution is arguably its re-contextualisation of the *Discourse on Inequality*, which presents John Locke and Montesquieu as two of Rousseau's principal interlocutors.

In light of these considerations, I think the most rewarding and charitable way of reading *Politics in Commercial Society* is not as 'a coherent and highly structured study that needs no further elaboration' (xxi), as its editors suggest, but rather, and much as we might expect from a series of lectures, as a source of original and challenging theses that will repay further investigation. My aim here is to investigate some of those theses by assessing the status Hont accords both Rousseau and Smith as theorists of commercial society. In the case of Smith, I seek to disentangle Hont's use of the terms 'commercial society' and 'commercial sociability', arguing that the former should not be defined in terms of the latter, before pushing back against his Epicurean reading of Smith on sociability. In the case of Rousseau, I highlight some of the difficulties involved with classifying him as a theorist of commercial society and argue that, in important respects, he and Smith did not share 'a view of the type of society whose politics they wanted to change', as Hont argues (2).

**Commercial society and commercial sociability**

The term commercial society is most readily associated with Adam Smith, even though the precise phrase is found only twice in *The Wealth of Nations* (1981: I.iv.1, V.i.f.52) and not at all in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.[2] Hont identifies two characteristics of commercial society in Smith, which stretch its meaning beyond the idea of a society characterised by commercial activity. The first is quantitative. Commercial societies contain 'a *great deal* of commercial and market activity.' (3, my emphasis; see also Hont, 2005: 160-161) It is the extent of commercial activity that separates a commercial society from an agricultural society, its immediate historical predecessor. Only once the division of labour is 'thoroughly established', such that most people live by exchanging the surplus of their own labour for the produce of the labour of others, is the society properly termed commercial (Smith, 1981: I.iv.1) There is no clear line dividing agricultural from commercial societies, but the transition from one to the other is nonetheless accompanied by a qualitative change in social relations. The qualitative aspect of commercial society is that individuals relate 'to one another as interactive commercial individuals, behaving generally as merchants act when entering a market.' (3) As Smith (1981: I.iv.1) wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*, everyone 'becomes in some measure a merchant', a claim which echoes an important passage from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that is central to Hont's analysis:

> Society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection; and though no man in it should owe any obligation, or be bound in gratitude to any other, it may still be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation. (Smith, 1982b: II.ii.3.2)

For Hont, it is this second, qualitative, aspect that is most important. 'The concept of commercial society describes the constitutive moral quality of the membership of this society, not the actual material trading activity itself.' For a society to be classified as commercial, then, it must be based on utility, rather than (for example) beneficence or solidarity, irrespective of the amount of trade that takes place (3-4). Smith, he later adds, worked out 'a definition of commercial society in terms of moral psychology.' (39) This point bears emphasising. Hont theorises commercial society in terms of the social bonds that characterise it. The defining feature of commercial society thus appears to be 'commercial sociability', by which he means 'the utilitarian bonds created by commercial reciprocity.' (7)

Commercial sociability is not Smith's term,[3] but Hont uses it to capture the idea of a society of merchants. However, it is doubtful whether this should be taken as the defining feature of commercial society for Smith. In the key passage from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he does not distinguish between different stages in the historical development of society, which is precisely what gives the idea of commercial society its explanatory power. To be sure, he was certainly concerned with the relation between commercial development and moral psychology. He associated commerce with probity, punctuality and prudence, while also arguing that its development tends to extinguish courage and martial spirit, and leave the lowest ranks of society uneducated (Smith, 1982a: 538-541). Yet his explanations of how commercial society differs from agricultural society make no reference to moral psychology and instead focus on the extension of commercial exchange, 'not only betwixt the individualls of the same society but betwixt those of different nations.' (Smith 1982a: 15-16) According to the 'natural course of things', a growing society directs its capital first 'to agriculture, afterwards to manufactures, and last of all to foreign commerce', even if modern European states have inverted this process (Smith, 1981: III.i.8-9). It is the advancement in manufacturing and foreign commerce, in particular, which he seemed to regard as the defining characteristics of a commercial rather than an agricultural society (see also Smith, 1981: V.i.a.6, V.iii.1). Hont, of course, is well aware of this side of Smith's analysis, but, by focusing predominantly on commercial sociability, he presents commercial society in a very different light to the one thinker whose use of the term 'validates it historically' (3).

One reason for keeping the terms commercial society and commercial sociability distinct is that they answer different questions. In the opening chapter of the book, the term commercial sociability is first discussed in relation to Thomas Hobbes. If humans are not naturally sociable creatures, desirous of society for its own sake, then what drives them to enter society? In *De Cive* Hobbes (1998: i.2) answered that societies exist for 'the sake of advantage or of glory'. But this claim is about human society in general. For Smith, the question of what drives humans to enter society is not a question about commercial society, since commercial society is the last of the four historical stages that human society takes. If commercial sociability is an explanation of what drives humans to live together in society in the first place, then it must apply to the earliest forms of human society, which were not commercial. If commercial sociability denotes the social bonds that characterise commercial societies, then it no longer answers the question of what originally drives humans to live together. The editors highlight the paradoxical nature of bringing the terms 'commercial' and 'sociability' together (xiii-xiv). But it is unclear that this paradox is illuminating. The phrase 'commercial sociability' conflates two different questions – one about

the origins of human sociability, the other about the social bonds that characterise commercial society – which are best kept distinct. This is evident, for example, when Hont considers the possibility that Smith was 'analyzing a commercial society as the source of morality' (18). This is perfectly plausible if Hont's point is about commercial *sociability*, but if it is about commercial *society* then it implies that Smith thought there was no morality in the hunting, pastoral or agricultural societies that preceded commercial society, which is clearly not the case.

While Hont appears to be offering a genealogy of commercial society in the opening chapter of the book, then, his focus quickly (and silently) shifts to commercial sociability.[4] The comparisons he draws between Rousseau and Smith, at least in the first two chapters, concern questions of sociability. In early-modern Europe these questions were often couched in terms of Stoicism vs. Epicureanism, and Hont adopts these labels to analyse the moral theories underlying Rousseau's and Smith's politics. Broadly speaking, Stoics held that humans were originally moral and sociable creatures, whereas for Epicureans morality and sociability were not original to human nature and developed only as a consequence of pursuing happiness (15-16). In arguing that they were theorists of commercial sociability, Hont places both Rousseau and Smith on the Epicurean side of the debate. He thereby arrives at one of the book's central arguments: Rousseau and Smith shared a moral theory – one that was at base Epicurean – even if their political visions differed (22).

In the Preface to his *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau (1992a: 14-15) famously denied natural sociability and posited two principles of human nature that precede the use of reason: love of self (*amour de soi-même*) and pity (*pitié*). Hont maintains that Smith's account of sympathy in the opening passages of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is based on generalising the pity model from Rousseau's *Discourse*.[5] Some of the earliest critics of the *Discourse* associated it with Hobbism and Epicureanism, and, for Hont, if Rousseau was an Epicurean then so too was Smith. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that Smith presented 'himself as someone who had properly developed the Hobbesian stream—that is, the selfish system…—to its proper conclusion'. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* 'was a treatise in enhanced Hobbism and Epicureanism.' (32) The textual evidence supporting this is Smith's remark that self-love theories seem 'to have arisen from some confused misapprehension of the system of sympathy', but Hont omits the opening sentence of the paragraph in question which gives a strikingly different impression: 'Sympathy, however, cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle.' (Smith, 1982b: VII.iii.1.4).

As with Rousseau, Smith's contemporary critics regarded him as an Epicurean (29-32). Yet Hont is well aware that reception history should be treated with caution, rightly noting that 'the prevalence of this view does not mean that it was fully or even substantially correct.' (31) As

he later adds, 'it is an extraordinary assumption to believe that only later generations misunderstood, whereas contemporaries do not' (41). Caution is especially in order when the interpretation in question provided an easy way of discrediting an opponent's theory, without having to undertake the far more difficult task of taking it seriously and showing precisely where it goes astray. When critics accused either Rousseau or Smith of Epicureanism, we should not assume that their primary aim was to accurately represent their interlocutor's theory, rather than, say, diverting attention from the intricacies of that theory by charging them with guilt by association. This point, however, cuts both ways. When Smith (1982b: VII.ii.2.13) insisted that Epicureanism is 'altogether inconsistent with that which I have been endeavouring to establish', a defender of the Epicurean reading might respond that he was just attempting to distance himself from criticism, rather than accurately presenting his own position. But Smith's denial of Epicureanism is well grounded, at least in respect to the principle of sympathy, which cannot straightforwardly be reduced to self-love.[6] Admitting this does not make Smith a Stoic. Instead, it suggests that he may be best read as carving through the Stoic-Epicurean dichotomy to articulate a nuanced and original theory reducible to neither side of the debate as previously construed.[7]

**Was Rousseau a theorist of commercial society?**

Smith was clearly a theorist of commercial society. The claim that Rousseau deemed his own principles of political right applicable for commercial society is more controversial, although not without some adherents (most recently Tuck, 2016: 3-4, 141-142). Whether or not the claim is endorsed will partly depend on how commercial society is theorised, and in light of the preceding discussion that question merits some attention. Even if we accept that Rousseau is a theorist of commercial sociability, as Hont understands the term, it does not necessarily follow that he is a theorist of commercial society (cf. 25). Hont sometimes conflates these terms in his discussion of Rousseau, such as when he writes that the 'second part of the second *Discourse* begins with a pure theory of commercial society in which there is no or little sociability but a great utilitarian need for cooperation.' (45) Yet the second part of the *Discourse* opens by explaining the invention of property prior to the revolutions of agriculture and metallurgy, which means it can hardly be an instance of commercial society in Smith's sense, that is, of the fourth and final stage of a long and complex process of economic development.

Like Smith, Rousseau thought that different stages of society could be identified based on different modes of human subsistence, and Hont offers an illuminating discussion of the posthumously published *Essay on the Origin of Languages* to fill in the gaps from the *Discourse on*

*Inequality* (57-61). Hont shows how, for Rousseau, associating to promote mutual utility was a feature of the northern societies that developed following enforced migration from their southern origins. As Rousseau (1998: 316) memorably remarked, the first words of southern peoples would have been *aimez-moi*, of northern peoples *aidez-moi*. In the *Essay* Rousseau distinguished between three ways of life: hunting, herding and agriculture. Hont adds that even if Rousseau did not mention a fourth stage, 'he knew what it was: the rise of urbanization, the city, with its dense population and ever-increasing frequency of exchange processes.' (61-62) The fact remains, however, that Rousseau only articulated a three-stage theory here and did not see the need to explicitly theorise a further distinction between agricultural and commercial societies, as we find in Smith. This point is worth keeping in mind whenever questions about whether Rousseau was a proponent or critic of commercial society arise. Any answer will depend on how commercial society is theorised, and that theory must be read back into Rousseau.

Leaving this difficulty aside, Hont's analysis of Rousseau's vision of an 'exchange-based commercial society in which everything grew in a balanced way' (104) is especially welcome. Political economy remains one of the most neglected dimensions of Rousseau's thought, which can lead to considerable misrepresentations of his ideas. Hont suggests that there is little basis for thinking that Rousseau supported 'a command economy, based on enforcement', and instead declares, somewhat subversively, that he 'was essentially a kind of libertarian' (101), by which Hont seems simply to mean a society based on labour, private property and trade between a 'network of agriculturally rooted household economies.' (106) Hont also challenges interpretations that take Rousseau to be opposed to all forms of economic progress or growth; he was, rather, a critic only 'of the excesses of commercial society.' (91) Rousseau, according to Hont, only opposed unbalanced growth, especially that which set the interests of agriculture and industry against one another. 'There was nothing wrong or evil with economic development as such. What was wrong, damaging, and morally evil was unbalanced growth: the runaway growth of cities, luxury, and industry' (104).

Precisely how critical Rousseau comes across varies depending on which text is consulted, and one of the merits of *Politics in Commercial Society* is to focus attention on his writings for Corsica and Poland, along with his *Encyclopédie* article on political economy, which might lead us to read the more familiar *Social Contract* in a different light. Yet Rousseau often seems a lot more resistant to commercial progress than Hont allows, most strikingly in his proposals for Corsica, the one country in modern Europe he deemed still capable of receiving good laws (Rousseau, 1994: ii.10). There Rousseau (2005a: 127) argues that commerce and agriculture are 'incompatible' and cannot flourish together, a theme that recurs in other writings (Rousseau, 1992b: 154; 2005b:

209-210). He was unequivocal on this point: 'I look at every system of commerce as destructive of agriculture so much so that I make no exception even for commerce in commodities that are the product of agriculture.' (Rousseau, 2005a: 139) In the passages where Rousseau comes closest to distinguishing between agricultural and commercial bases of society, then, he does so in defence of the former against the latter. A thoroughgoing defence of the thesis that Rousseau is a theorist of commercial society would need to address such passages.

When writing with Geneva in mind, Rousseau recognised that there was no escaping the level of commercialisation and urbanisation that had already taken place. As he wrote in a passage often cited by those who read him as a theorist of commercial society (e.g. Tuck, 2016: 2-3, 141-142), Genevans 'are Merchants, Artisans, Bourgeois, always occupied with their private interests, with their work, with their trafficking, with their gain; people for whom even liberty is only a means for acquiring without obstacle and for possessing in safety.' (Rousseau, 2001: 293). Here Rousseau did seem to be theorising a society characterised by the utilitarian bonds created by commercial reciprocity, which, to recall, is how Hont defines commercial sociability (the moral psychology definitive of commercial society). But it is worth highlighting that Rousseau was criticising Genevans in the passage in question and more generally bemoaned the escalation of commerce and manufacturing in Switzerland, which led to citizens becoming corrupt: 'love of fatherland (*l'amour de la patrie*), extinguished in all hearts, gave way there to love of money alone' (Rousseau, 2005a: 136). Perhaps commercial sociability was all that remained to bind Genevans together in the 1760s, but this was the case for neither Corsica nor Poland. In relation to the latter, Hont stresses the importance of appealing to citizens' sense of genuine honour – not Montesquieu's false honour – through civic and economic distinctions (120), but the purposes of these honours, for Rousseau (2005b: 176), was to inculcate 'all the patriotic virtues' by keeping citizens 'ceaselessly occupied with the fatherland' and thereby instilling in their hearts a more powerful desire than that of becoming wealthy.

Smith (1982b: II.ii.3.2) thought that society could subsist 'from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection'. Such a society, 'though less happy and agreeable, will not necessarily be dissolved.' Rousseau was not so confident and at times argued that it was necessary – *contra* Smith (1982b: II.ii.3.1) – that citizens are 'bound together by the agreeable bonds of love and affection'. As Rousseau (2005b: 152-154) wrote in the *Discourse on Political Economy*, the 'fatherland cannot subsist without freedom, nor freedom without virtue, nor virtue without citizens.' Political virtue is cashed out in terms of *amour de la patrie*, and, as Hont observes in a different context, it is important to emphasise that Rousseau was talking about love here (60). Hont argues that the *Discourse on Inequality* should be read as Rousseau's response to

Montesquieu's defence of modern monarchy as a stable system based on false honour and inequality (especially 43-45, 72-73). This is certainly plausible, but there is some tension between presenting Rousseau as both a theorist of commercial society and a fierce critic of Montesquieu. Indeed, Rousseau (1994: iii.4) reproached Montesquieu for failing to see that political virtue, which they both understood in terms of *amour de la patrie*, is the principle of all legitimate states. If we follow Hont's approach of theorising commercial society in terms of its moral psychology, then, it is not evident that the type of society whose politics Rousseau wanted to change was one based on the utilitarian bonds created by commercial reciprocity.

**Conclusion**

The reason why asking whether Rousseau's political and economic proposals were intended for commercial society matters is because it offers a way of tying his thought to the present. If we live in commercial societies today, and Rousseau was a theorist of commercial society, then he may still have something to teach us, even if it is only in seeing where and why he fell short and pondering whether we have progressed much further since (132). When considering why Rousseau's and Smith's politics turned out differently, however, Hont observes that 'Rousseau was Genevan, and *The Social Contract* addresses city republics like Geneva', which involved cutting short 'the long-term history of Europe … by making it appear as if the politics of ancient city-states, and particularly that of the Roman Republic, could be continued a millennium and a half later.' Smith, by contrast, saw that 'modern European politics was no longer the politics of city-states.' (63-64) Whether or not this difference maps onto the question of theorising commercial society, it is arguably the most salient difference for thinking about Rousseau and Smith as theorists of modern politics. Hont's observation neatly captures why Smith came much closer than Rousseau to having theorised the type of societies that would prevail in modern Europe. But it also reveals that Rousseau's and Smith's theories are not as close as Hont more generally argues, because, in this crucial respect, they did not share a view of the type of society whose politics they wanted to change.

As with all Hont's work, his lectures on Rousseau and Smith challenge us to think more deeply and carefully about the categories we use to understand modern politics. I have tried to show that theorising commercial society is even more complicated than Hont's analysis suggests, by emphasising how his account departs from both Rousseau and Smith in key places. Towards the beginning of this article I quoted Hont's comment that theorising commercial society is an

unfinished journey. *Politics in Commercial Society* offers frequent signposts, many of them pointing in unexpected and underexplored directions. But the journey remains for others to complete.

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers are to Hont (2015). Where relevant, references to early-modern sources are given by part/book/section/chapter/paragraph numbers as appropriate (rather than by page number) for ease of comparison with other editions.

[2] The clearest account of how the 'Age of Commerce' differs from those that preceded it – the ages of hunters, of shepherds and of agriculture – is found in Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1982a: 14-16, 459).

[3] In his important essay on Samuel Pufendorf's influence on Smith's four-stages theory, originally published in 1986, Hont argued that Pufendorf 'constructed his jurisprudence around the concept of commercial sociability' (2005: 183), which occupied the conceptual space between Grotius's account of natural sociability and Hobbes's rejection of sociability.

[4] The relation between commerce and sociability has long been a central theme of Hont's work (especially 1994: 60-72; 2005, 37-51, 159-184), some of which he draws from in the opening chapter of *Politics in Commercial Society*. The relative brevity of his analysis in the opening chapter might explain why the conflation of 'commercial society' and 'commercial sociability' appears starker there, along with the fact that he places more emphasis on defining commercial society in terms of its moral psychology than in his earlier work.

[5] For a different interpretation of the evidence underpinning this claim, see Douglass (2017, 605-606). More generally, see Griswold (2010: 61-71), who teases out some of the key philosophical differences between Smith's sympathy and Rousseau's *pitié*. On the question of Rousseau's influence on Smith, see Sagar (2018), who pushes back against Hont's interpretation while emphasising the more considerable influence of Hume.

[6] Also relevant here is Smith's distinction between love of praise and love of praiseworthiness. While Smith never uses the term 'sociability' in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he does argue that where love of praise 'could only have made [man] wish to appear to be fit for society', love of praiseworthiness 'was necessary in order to render him really fit.' (Smith, 1982b: III.2.7)

[7] See also Harris (2016: 162). It is tempting when contesting those who have read too much Stoicism into Smith (e.g. Force, 2003) to instead situate him in a modern Epicurean tradition (Robertson 2005: 395–396; see also Brooke, 2012: 205–207), and this may well have been the case with Hont too (e.g. 37-38).

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